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ABSTRACT

A sample of 134 adults enrolled in adult education programs for credit ranked types of test items. From most to least preferred, the five types of test item were multiple choice, true/false, matching, fill-in-the-blank, and essay. Respondents also explained which type of test item contributed to anxiety for them. Vaguely written essay questions and poor scoring and grading practices caused anxiety. A true/false test contributed to anxiety when too much was read into the question. Multiple-choice items constructed to have a best answer tended to be confusing. (Less anxiety, however, was also associated with the same five types of items for some respondents). An adult learner's felt need to do well on an examination and the need to schedule study time contributed to pretest anxiety. Most responses indicated that the test administrator would need to know the individuals' specific symptoms to recognize anxiety. The test constructor and the level and quality of test were factors in the individual's anxiety. It was suggested that sensitivity to the learners, their level of written expression, and the quality of the test items are all conrolled by the instructor, and that instructors could alleviate anxiety by showing students consideration. (YLB)

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TEST ANXIETY IN ADULTS

Tests are teaching tools which are often constructed without much thought being given to the anxiety levels of those taking the test. A level of anxiety is accepted as normal. Yet, there is the individual who is overwhelmed by anxiety and is unable to perform in a testing situation. This individual's test anxiety should be minimized if possible. Careful selection and construction of test items can contribute to or ease the adult student's anxiety.

A survey was made of adults who were enrolled in adult education programs for credit (N=134). Those surveyed were in the trades, nursing, the extension service, social work, and GED programs. The respondents ranked five types of test items identifying the most preferred item to the least preferred. Multiple choice was the most preferred type of test item followed closely by essay. True/false and matching were respectively ranked as next preferred following essay.

The ranking of the least preferred items is interesting. The least preferred type of test item was the essay followed closely by the fill-in-the-blank and true/false items respectively.

ANXIETY AND THE TYPE ITEM

The respondents also explained which type test item contributed to anxiety for them. No attempt was made to scale the level of anxiety experienced. Essay items created anxiety for many. Explanations indicated a lack of confidence in ability to communicate in writing. Difficulty putting answers in

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written form may be due to lack of training on how to prepare for an essay examination. In addition to the written answer, studying for an essay examination presented difficulty. General explanatory statements indicated that for some adults the pace of the test was slowed by the writing. Difficulty in recalling information, supplying ideas, and organizing in a timed situation contributed to the student's nervousness that the expected information may not be given.

Pointed comments from the respondents were aimed at the essay test constructor and grader. Vaguely written essay questions have led to student uncertainty regarding the expected response. Answers not recognized by the respondent as clearly right or wrong led some to describe their writing as "shooting the breeze". Difficulty in budgeting time, lack of confidence, and poor test construction combine to create problems for the adult learner. This, coupled with poor scoring and grading practices, causes anxiety.

A true/false test can contribute to anxiety when too much is read into the question and the student becomes confused about the learning. True/false items can be constructed with one word causing the difference in interpretation. The student can lose time looking for the trick and misread the item. When items are generally not used to measure understanding, the emphasis is placed on small details which are trivia. Instructors also often fail to recognize that their test has been poorly prepared.

Multiple choice items which are constructed to have a best answer tend to be confusing. Shades of meanings can be

implied leading to an ambiguous and confusing question. This can present problems for the prepared student interpreting a poorly written question.

Matching items were not identified as inducing much anxiety and appeared to be middle scale. The ability to associate seemed to alleviate anxiety. Fill-in-the-blank, however, raised anxiety because of the felt pressure to recall a specific word and attend to detail within a designated time. Answers to these items are often graded right or wrong without deviation, yet the items may be ambiguous and the correct answer one word which is a subjective judgment. Spelling was cited as an added presure. Some respondents offered the limited explanation that "I go blank" which indicates a breakdown in the retrieval of learned information.

Less anxiety is also associated with these same five types of items. The resulting comments are complementary to the explanations offered for items linked with higher anxiety. When answering true/false items some are comfortable memorizing information. The answer is there and the probability is good that it can be recognized. Logic can be used. The pace is quick and allows the individual to think fast.

When confronting multiple choice items, respondents reported a feeling of not being so forced in choice. Again, one must just recognize the answer. With knowledge, memorization is not required. The process of association and elimination are useful. Using reasoning lessens anxiety for some.

Answers to matching questions can be distinguished from recall or recall with association. Again process of elimination

can be used. Also the matching exercises lead some to feel they know what the instructor is thinking. There is less anxiety in fill-in-the-blank for the few who recognize which answer is right or wrong. Either they know it or they do not.

Essay questions are perceived as practical and easier to study for because the items are flexible and the thought can be explained. Many felt confident in their ability to communicate and express ideas using their background and experience. Others wanted to include information which had been learned but would not show on an objective test. The opportunity to expand knowledge into meaningful answers with originality led to less anxiety for many.

PRETEST ANXIETY

Adults often must schedule their study time and use the available time with efficiency. Wanting more study time (which may not actually be necessary) leaves the adult student with a feeling of being unprepared which leads to heightened anxiety. Anxiety during study time contributes to a lack of concentration. The adult may be easily distracted and find themselves daydreaming, drawing, and doodling. Beacuse of these behaviors, information may become confused or forgotten causing inferior test performance. A total blank may be drawn during the test which contributes to a raised anxiety level. In addition, lapses in thought patterns are frustrating to the adult who then compensates by more studying and memorizing.

Prior to a test even the person who has studied has dreads and physical responses to the resulting stress. One individual

claimed "complete spasticity when tested in groups". Smokers reported an increase in smoking. In conversations prior to the test, some students realized or felt they were talking fast and in a near nonsense fashion. Others reported unusual quietness, irritability, or tiredness prior to the test, indicators of anxiety.

RECOGNIZING ANXIETY

Most responses indicated that the test administrator would need to know the individuals' symptoms to recognize anxiety, for example "if they knew that I chewed on my glasses," or "by the look on my face". More obvious physical responses are wiggling in the chair, staring into space, tapping or twirling a pencil, crossing legs or shuffling feet, nail biting, or rubbing the shoulders to loosen the muscles. Increased smoking and pencil pressure on paper are also means for recognizing test anxiety. One person said that the test paper would actually be damp from hand perspiration.

As a result of test anxiety, the learner overlooks details. This results in the appearance of careless test taking habits, such as not finishing sentences and making grammatical errors. Items may be counted several times with the person hurrying to the next item which may result in a lower than usual test score.

One individual summed the situation when he said that the administrator could recognize his nervousness by his "appearance, attitude, and 'happy' nervous face."

TEST ADMINSTRATORS AFFECT ANXIETY

The adult learner wants fair treatment from the instructor. The students should be made aware of the stated objectives, and the test should reflect the objectives and the materials covered. The instructor is expected to provide the basic guidelines regarding what to expect and how to prepare. The adult student also wants to be assured that the test will be fair to those who study. The desire for quality test items indicates a need for better test construction. Even with a reasonable test, adults want assurances of an evaluation without critical emphasis on the test results, however, in a credit earning situation this may be difficult.

During the actual testing situation the adult would like to be given clear instructions with questions permitted. After explaining the format, adequate time must be allowed for completion of the test. It was also suggested that prior to the test that small talk would help lower tension. The adminstrator, however, is asked not to talk once the test begins and to have no talking until everyone is finished. Others asked that they be given the test without having to wait. There were those who preferred the test adminstrator walk around to see if people need help. Either situation suggests that the space in the classroom should be used to the best advantage of the student.

The relationship between the adult student and the test adminstrator appears to be a factor in easing test anxiety. Students want to feel that the instructor is accessable to talk with them. The adult learner wants to be offered encouragement and assurances which would indicate flexibility in the

test situation. Some adults who have problems when tested in groups may need to be placed by themselves. An oral test or a quiz in an informal nontesting situation can also alleviate some anxiety. Low scores for adult students may indicate stress.

Two people reported they had asked an instructor for consideration during a test situation. One received understanding and other arrangements were made for testing. The other reported that the instructor refused in a sarcastic manner. Those who explained their failure to approach the instructor for consideration were afraid to ask for fear of refusal.

Probability is low to nonexistant that tests will be eliminated. Test anxiety, therefore, is a real problem. There are adults who will never feel comfortable with a test. One person commented that the anxiety associated with testing is the student's problem and must be handled by the student, and little can be done by the administrator to ease the student's anxiety.

SUMMARY

The results from this survey indicate that the adult learner is sensitive to the type item presented. Responses also indicate the general testing environment must be considered. An adult learner's felt need to do well on an examination and the need to schedule study time contributes to stress prior to the test. The test constructor and the level and quality of the test is a factor in the individual's anxiety. Sensitivity to

the learner, his level of written expression, and the quality of the test item presented is controlled by the instructor. The test should be prepared with the stated objectives in mind and contain clearly stated questions which the learner has little difficulty interpreting. Time should be spent on developing quality tests and test items which are relevant and fair for the student who has studied. The idea of a test is stressful and consideration should alleviate excessive anxiety in many adult students.